

God's Mission My Mission

Mission to the Unreached: Part 1

Lesson #10 for December 9, 2023

Scriptures: Acts 17; 1 Chronicles 2:2; Romans 1:18-25.

1. Paul had to leave Thessalonica and later Berea because enemies were coming to arrest him and possibly kill him. As a result, he was taken to Athens. Athens, of course, was a major city with a very polytheistic background. What do we know about Paul's usual methods for approaching a new city?
2. How do you think Paul managed to find the Jewish Synagogue in each town that he visited? How many Jews were actively working with Gentiles to get them to join their Jewish communities and worship with them? Do we know anything about these people and what their message was? In almost every city that Paul went to, he found not only Jews but also Gentiles who had joined the Jewish community. How were these people attracted?
3. When Paul went to Athens, he was faced with a new and very challenging situation.

Acts 17:1-16: ¹ Paul and Silas travelled on through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue. ²According to his usual habit Paul went to the synagogue. There during three Sabbaths he held discussions with the people, **quoting** ³**and explaining the Scriptures and proving from them that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from death.** "This Jesus whom I announce to you," Paul said, "is the Messiah." ⁴Some of them were convinced and joined Paul and Silas; so **did many of the leading women and a large group of Greeks who worshipped God.** ⁵ But some Jews were jealous and gathered worthless loafers from the streets and formed a mob. They set the whole city in an uproar and attacked the home of a man called Jason, in an attempt to find Paul and Silas and bring them out to the people. ⁶But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city authorities and shouted, "These men have caused trouble everywhere! Now they have come to our city, ⁷and Jason has kept them in his house. They are all breaking the laws of the Emperor, saying that there is another king, whose name is Jesus." ⁸With these words they threw the crowd and the city authorities into an uproar. ⁹The authorities made Jason and the others pay the required amount of money to be released, and then let them go.

[In Berea]

¹⁰ As soon as night came, the believers sent Paul and Silas to **Berea**. When they arrived, they went to the synagogue. ¹¹The people there were more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica. They listened to the message with great eagerness, and every day they studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true. ¹²**Many of them believed; and many Greek women of high social standing and many Greek men also believed.** ¹³But when the Jews in Thessalonica heard that Paul had preached the word of God in Berea also, they came there and started

exciting and stirring up the mob. ¹⁴At once the believers sent Paul away to the coast; but both Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea. ¹⁵The men who were taking Paul went with him as far as Athens and then returned to Berea with instructions from Paul that Silas and Timothy should join him as soon as possible.

[In Athens]

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting in Athens for Silas and Timothy, he was greatly upset when he noticed how full of idols the city was.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., Acts 17:1-16). New York: American Bible Society [abbreviated as *Good News Bible*].^{†‡}

4. Athens was full of idols as well as statuary of various kinds and many different temples. So, the question could be raised: **Why were/are people attracted to idols?** Why are people attracted to sin?
5. If we were to visit a new city, would we be aware of what people were worshiping in that city? With the Holy Spirit's help, Paul was fully attuned to what the Athenians were worshiping. He discovered that there was an idol and an altar to an unknown god. Immediately, he recognized his opening wedge. Paul knew that the gospel was for the entire world, and he intended to share it with the people of Athens, if possible.

[From the writings of Ellen G. White=EGW:] The world today has its Ahabs and its Jezebels. The present age is one of idolatry, as verily as was that in which Elijah lived. No outward shrine may be visible; there may be no image for the eye to rest upon; yet thousands are following after the gods of this world—after riches, fame, pleasure, and the pleasing fables that permit man to follow the inclinations of the unregenerate heart. **Multitudes have a wrong conception of God and His attributes, and are as truly serving a false god as were the worshipers of Baal.** Many even of those who claim to be Christians have allied themselves with influences that are unalterably opposed to God and His truth. Thus they are led to turn away from the divine and to exalt the human.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings** 177.1.^{†‡}

6. ***Do we have things that are somehow similar or equivalent to the fertility-cult practices of ancient Palestine? The basic motive behind all of the “false idols” is selfishness, doing what the sinful heart longs to do. It could be riches, fame, or self-indulgences of various kinds; but, the basic motive is self. Little or no time is “wasted” on doing anything out of love for others!***
7. As Paul walked through the marketplace in Athens, he was thinking about how this context could be used as a place to spread the gospel. But, he recognized it would not be the same as speaking to Jews or Gentiles who were following the Jewish religion.
8. How can we reach out to people who think that the Bible is an ancient book full of fairytales and useless or even false history? Can you recognize idols that are popular in our day?
9. Notice what Paul did:

Acts 17:18-21: ¹⁸Certain **Epicurean** and **Stoic** teachers also debated with him. Some of them asked, “What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?”

Others answered, “He seems to be talking about foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹So they took Paul, brought him before the city council, the Areopagus, and said, “We would like to know what this new teaching is that you are talking about. ²⁰Some of the things we hear you say sound strange to us, and we would like to know what they mean.” ²¹(For all the citizens of Athens and the foreigners who lived there liked to spend all their time telling and hearing the latest new thing.)—*Good News Bible*.^{*†}

10. Is there anything that conservative Christians could say that would attract the attention of worldlings in our day? What does the average worldling today think about what happens after death? Does that matter to them?

11. It was not long before Paul grabbed the attention of a number of the Athenians. In Athens there was a special place where major discussions took place. It was known as the Areopagus or Mars Hill. And whenever someone came up with a collection of new ideas, he was taken there to hear him out. Most of those who were present when Paul spoke would be considered atheists in our context. Paul grew up as a Roman citizen in a Greek-speaking city. He was a privileged gentleman. He must have been very aware of the ideas that were popular in Athens. Remember that he was able to quote one of their poets!

[EGW:] With hand outstretched toward the temple[s] crowded with idols, Paul poured out the burden of his soul, and exposed the fallacies of the religion of the Athenians. **The wisest of his hearers were astonished as they listened to his reasoning. He showed himself familiar with their works of art, their literature, and their religion.** Pointing to their statuary and idols, he declared that God could not be likened to forms of man’s devising. These graven images could not, in the faintest sense, represent the glory of Jehovah. He reminded them that these images had no life, but were controlled by human power, moving only when the hands of men moved them; and therefore those who worshiped them were in every way superior to that which they worshiped.—Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*,* vol. 3, 400.2 [1878]; *The Acts of the Apostles** 237.2.[†]

12. Apparently, Paul did not get the response he was hoping for in Athens. We conclude that based on what he said when he arrived in Corinth. What did Paul say to the Corinthians about Jesus that impressed them or caught their attention? Was it that Someone had risen from the dead? The cross was certainly not an attraction! What do you think he said about the cross?

1 Corinthians 2:2: For while I was with you, I made up my mind to forget everything except Jesus Christ and especially his death on the cross.—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

13. It is important to notice that Paul became familiar with their religious beliefs to see if he could build on them in some way.

14. Is it important to learn about other religions or other churches so we do not make false accusations against them? Or, should we ask polite questions about what they believe?

Acts 17:22-23: ²² Paul stood up in front of the city council and said, “I see that in every way you Athenians are very religious. ²³For as I walked through your city and looked at the places where you worship, I found an altar on which is written, ‘To an Unknown God’. [sic] That which you worship, then, even though you do not know it, is what I now proclaim to you.”—*Good News Bible*.*†

15. As you can see, Paul started with something with which they were familiar. And he complemented them for being religious.
16. Paul did not start out by bragging about the fact that he knew the truth and they did not! He figured out ways to incorporate some of their ideas into his overall agenda.
17. What “bridges” and points of contact can you think of that would open opportunities for deeper conversation with others with whom you come in contact?
18. Once Paul had the attention of his listeners, he gradually worked his way around to talking about God.

Acts 17:24-28: ²⁴ “God, who made the world and everything in it, is Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples made by human hands. ²⁵Nor does he need anything that we can supply by working for him, **since it is he himself who gives life and breath and everything else to everyone.** ²⁶From one human being he created all races on earth and made them live throughout the whole earth. He himself fixed beforehand the exact times and the limits of the places where they would live. ²⁷He did this so that they would look for him, and perhaps find him as they felt about for him. Yet God is actually not far from any one of us; ²⁸as someone has said,
‘In him we live and move and exist.’
It is as some of your poets have said,
‘We too are his children.’”—*Good News Bible*.*†

19. Notice that he wove in ideas from their ancestors with which they were familiar. Paul then suggested to them that he wanted to introduce them to the God who had created them and whom they needed to know more about.
20. How long do you suppose Paul was talking to the intellectuals on Mars Hill? It was certainly longer than the copy of the speech that we have from Luke’s writings in Acts. Notice some of the main concepts of Paul:

[BSG:] Paul first complimented their current spiritual awareness and sincerity.

Next he showed that he had studied their belief and that he found some things that he respected from what he had learned.

He then told them about one particular thing that he had discovered in his study of their religion that they admitted they did not understand.

After that, he shared the aspect of God that he knew they desperately needed, which is the fact that God exists and that He loves them and is not far away.

Finally, at the end of his speech, Paul moved to warning them of what it means to reject the knowledge of this God they did not yet know.

Paul took them as far as he could, based on what he knew about what they believed. If he could get them that far, he was making good progress.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, December 6.

21. Everyone has come from somewhere. There is a genetic history behind each of us. So, talking about where human beings originally came from is often a good idea.
22. The pagan religions with which they were very familiar, often pictured some of their god's becoming angry and lashing out and causing trouble. So, Paul said, by contrast, why not discuss the wrath of the true God:

Romans 1:18-25: ¹⁸ God's anger is revealed from heaven against all the sin and evil of the people whose evil ways prevent the truth from being known. ¹⁹God punishes them, because what can be known about God is plain to them, for God himself made it plain. ²⁰Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made. So those people have no excuse at all! ²¹They know God, but they do not give him the honour [*sic-Br*] that belongs to him, nor do they thank him. Instead, their thoughts have become complete nonsense, and their empty minds are filled with darkness. ²²They say they are wise, but they are fools; ²³instead of worshipping the immortal God, they worship images made to look like mortal human beings or birds or animals or reptiles. ²⁴ And so God has given those people over to do the filthy things their hearts desire, and they do shameful things with each other. ²⁵They exchange the truth about God for a lie; they worship and serve what God has created instead of the Creator himself, who is to be praised for ever! Amen.—*Good News Bible.*†*

23. So, what did Paul do next? He began to point out that God, the true God, is not like the gods with whom they were familiar.

Acts 17:29-34: ²⁹ **“Since we are God’s children, we should not suppose that his nature is anything like an image of gold or silver or stone, shaped by human art and skill.** ³⁰God has overlooked the times when people did not know him, but now he commands all of them everywhere to turn away from their evil ways. ³¹**For he has fixed a day in which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!”**

³²When they heard Paul speak about a raising from death, some of them made fun of him, but others said, “We want to hear you speak about this again.” ³³And so Paul left the meeting. ³⁴Some men joined him and believed, among whom was Dionysius, a member of the council; there was also a woman named Damaris, and some other people.—*Good News Bible.*†*

24. Like Paul, when discussing with people, we should try to speak about something with which they are familiar. And then, if possible, link it to something that is important to know for their salvation.

[BSG:] We know that some people will reject the gospel, but we must do everything possible to ensure that before they reject it, they understand what they are rejecting. Paul, by his method of working among the Athenians and his strategic use of what he had studied and learned of them, ensured that they heard with open minds that a God existed whom they did not know but who had created them. This God loved them and wanted to be known by them. He had been merciful to them in spite of their ignorance. But Judgment Day was coming. And if all of this sounded too unbelievable, there was verifiable evidence for it in the resurrection of Christ.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Thursday, December 7.‡

25. Having talked about Paul's approach to the Athenians, does it give you any good ideas about how to approach people you know who are unreached? Or, unfamiliar with Scripture? Would it be appropriate to pray that God will guide you to know what are the right words to say?

[BSG:] **Challenge: In prayer, ask for God's specific guidance in knowing how best to witness to someone you know.**

Challenge Up: Explore social media as a possible "Areopagus" for you to represent the gospel—with Paul's clarity and discretion—to unbelievers.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Thursday, December 7.†‡

[EGW:] The words of the apostle, and the description of his attitude and surroundings, as traced by the pen of inspiration, were to be handed down to all coming generations, bearing witness of his unshaken confidence, his courage in loneliness and adversity, and the victory he gained for Christianity in the very heart of paganism.

Paul's words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. He was in a position where he might easily have said that which would have irritated his proud listeners and brought himself into difficulty. Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown.—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles** 240.3-241.1.‡

26. Perhaps one of the most important things to recognize from Paul's speech is that he did not irritate his hearers. Ellen White suggested that this is a treasure of knowledge that we as a church need to pay attention to in the story.

[BSG:] 1. With the story of Paul in Athens as a model, what is the first step for anyone beginning new evangelistic work in a city? [**Get to know the people and their beliefs.**]

2. What sort of behavior is required of a Christian to build bridges with people in the city (and frankly, anywhere else) who do not know God?

3. When we are provoked by the modern types of idols, what should we avoid doing, especially right at first, in starting new work among the people who worship those idols?

4. Paul could have stopped with just introducing the people to this God who loved them, and they would have been quite pleased. But then he crossed a line that made people think he was deluded when he brought in the Resurrection. Should he have done that? Why, or why not?—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, December 8.†‡

27. In our world today, are there many people with little or no understanding of the basic principles of Judeo-Christian thinking? How do we reach outside our comfort zone to minister to such people? Think of all the major religions in the world that are very different from Christianity: Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, even atheism and communism, etc. Each of these religious groups have their own jargon and words that they believe are important. Should we attempt to get to understand a little bit about their religion before we approach them?

28. Paul certainly approached the Christians in Antioch and the Jewish believers there of Gentile background very differently than how he approached the Athenians.

29. In Acts 13:13-43, Paul told us how he approached the Jews and Gentile followers of Judaism in the town of Antioch in Pisidia. He used quite a lot of Jewish history. And then, pointed out how the Old Testament points to the coming of Jesus the Messiah and how Jesus came and fulfilled all those criteria that have been prophesied about Him.

[BSG:] In His farewell speech before ascending to heaven, Jesus commissioned His disciples to be His witnesses among people of every nation of the world (*Matt. 28:19*). “Nations” in Matthew 28:19 refers not to nation states but to “people groups.” A people group refers to a group of individuals that have a common sense of history, language, beliefs, and identity. There is no human society on earth where the gospel of Jesus should not be presented and where disciples should not be made for Him. Frontline mission agencies, such as Global Frontier Missions and the Joshua Project, estimate that **there are about 17,446 people groups in the world, with more than 7,400 of them considered to be unreached by the gospel. In other words**, 42 percent of the world’s people groups lack indigenous communities of Christians who are able to evangelize, without an external witness, the rest of the people groups. Ninety-five of the least reached people groups by the gospel are spread across the 10/40 window, an area mostly populated by tribal people, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and the non-religious. Some of these people groups have little or no access to the gospel. People not yet reached by the gospel also exist in Western nations, because of the widening impact of secularism.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 132.†§

30. We must try to reach people using ideas with which they are familiar and with which they can identify.

[BSG:] The above point is best illustrated by Mark Allan Powell’s 2004 publication of the results of his research on the impact of people’s daily

realities on their reading and interpretation of Scripture (see Mark Allan Powell, “The Forgotten Famine: Personal Responsibility in Luke’s Parable of the ‘Prodigal Son,’” in *Literary Encounters With the Reign of God*, Sharon H. Ringe and H. C. Paul Kim, eds. [New York: T & T Clark, 2004]). In the first phase of this research, Powell surveyed two groups of seminary students, one in the United States and the other in St. Petersburg, Russia. The experiment consisted of asking the students to read the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32, close their Bibles, and then recount it from memory as accurately as possible to one another in their respective groups. Powell discovered two major differences in the oral recounting of this parable. On one hand, while only 6 percent of the American students remembered the famine mentioned in verse 14, 84 percent of the students in St. Petersburg referred to it. On the other hand, 100 percent of the American students emphasized the prodigal son’s squandering of his inheritance, whereas only 34 percent of the Russian students remembered this detail. For the American students, the mention of the famine seems to be an extra detail that adds nothing fundamental to the story. Because they had no recent recollection of famine, they all emphasized the squandering of wealth as irresponsible behavior. However, for the Russian students, who lived and interacted with some of the survivors of the 900-day Nazi army siege of the city of St. Petersburg in 1941, which triggered a famine that killed up to 670,000 people, the mention of the famine was a significant detail that added a lot to the story. This experiment is a good illustration of the need to adapt our message to our audience, both in style and content, just as Paul did with the Athenians.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 133.†Ω§

31. Look again at that story of the lost son or the prodigal son.

Luke 15:11-32: ¹¹ Jesus went on to say, “There was once a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to him, ‘Father, give me my share of the property now.’ So the man divided his property between his two sons. ¹³After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. ¹⁴He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. ¹⁵So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. ¹⁶He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. ¹⁷At last he came to his senses and said, ‘All my father’s hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father and say, Father, I have sinned against God and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers.’ ²⁰So he got up and started back to his father.

“He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity, and he ran, threw his arms round his son, and kissed him. ²¹‘Father,’ the son said, ‘I have sinned against God and against you. I am

no longer fit to be called your son.’ ²²But the father called his servants. ‘Hurry!’ he said. ‘Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. ²³Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! ²⁴For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ And so the feasting began. ²⁵ “In the meantime the elder son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard the music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him, ‘What’s going on?’ ²⁷‘Your brother has come back home,’ the servant answered, ‘and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The elder brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. ²⁹But he answered his father, ‘Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! ³⁰But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!’ ³¹‘My son,’ the father answered, ‘you are always here with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be happy, because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.’ ”—*Good News Bible*.*

32. How many of the details would you have remembered?

33. This lesson has focused mostly on Paul’s experience with the Athenians. But, think of others who had experiences which were quite unusual.

[BSG:] Compared to his contemporaries, Paul was unconventional in his approach to ministry, especially in Athens. He could even be described as avantgarde when it came to the need to be versatile and adaptive in mission. His unique missionary qualities are desperately needed today. The modern-day Areopagus exists in different parts and forms in many urban centers. It could be a city square, a park, a street corner, a shopping center, a university amphitheater, or a café. The church needs members with corresponding gifts, talents, personalities, and creativity, empowered and released for ministry in such centers. Members who are equipped to enter into nontraditional spheres, as well as engaged non-Christians, should be entrusted with the latitude to explore new ways of sharing the gospel, even if these ways appear at first to be unorthodox.

God’s asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the son through whom God promised to make him the father of many nations, was unconventional (*Genesis 22*). Elisha’s telling Naaman to “go in peace” after Naaman made his two strange requests (*2 Kings 5*) was very unsettling at best (see last week’s lesson). God’s telling Isaiah to roam the streets of the city naked for three years, declaring a message of doom for Judah’s allies, was really bizarre (*Isa. 20:2–4*). Think about the embarrassment Micah might have felt when God asked him not only to walk around naked but to howl like a jackal and moan like an owl (*Micah 1:8*)! In light of these biblical precedents, “When read in its context, the Bible offers many statements and examples

that show God's approval for methods of mission that may go against the grain of our comfortable practices. Broad reading and the clear texts of the Bible . . . suggest that God is more open and creative than we are. If that is the case, we should not be quick to condemn that which is different or uncomfortable."—Jon Paulien, "The Unpredictable God: Creative Mission and the Biblical Testimony," in *A Man of Passionate Reflection*, Bruce L. Bauer, ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2011), p. 85.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 134.†§

34. Sometimes we suggest that when ideas which are unusual and not familiar to certain individuals are presented, those ideas or words go in one ear and out the other! People have to connect what they hear with something with which they are familiar. The best evangelists are those who understand something of the cultures and worldviews of the people for whom they are working. So, in summary, let us consider some basic principles for reaching out to the unreached:

[BSG:] 1. People's cultures, with their deep-seated worldview assumptions, are their only frame of reference. People cannot be confronted with things that are beyond their frame of reference and be expected to respond positively to them. It is, therefore, essential to always be sensitive to the daily realities of the people to whom we witness....

2. We need to act with restraint and respect in our attitude toward non-Christians. We can get significant insights about non-Christians by studying their belief systems and talking to them for the sake of finding common ground that could be used as a point of contact for presenting the gospel....

3. We also should focus on our audience's felt needs and aspirations and show them how Christ answers them. We should not allow our own cultural perspectives to get in the way of how God wants to introduce Himself to non-Christians through us. It is important that, in presenting the gospel, we refrain from assuming that our audience knows what we know about God, cares about values we care about, understands the concept of sin as we do, and feels guilty and in need of God's forgiveness....

4. Finally, we need to guard ourselves against watering down our message in the process of adapting it to our audience. The gospel is meant to challenge aspects of all worldview assumptions that are not in line with Scripture.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** 135-136.‡

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